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James Earl Ray's '66 Mustang returns to scene of the crime

By Clay Bailey
Staff Reporter

For the first time in almost 20 years, James Earl Ray's 1966 white Mustang showed up in front of 422½ South Main yesterday.

Auctioneer Don B. Smith brought the car to the neighborhood for some publicity photographs. The last time the Ford automobile was in the area, Ray was pulling away from the boarding house where he fired the shot that killed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Sometime this afternoon, Smith will bring down his gavel at The Peabody, and the highest bidder will be the first one to take title of the car since Eric Starvo Galt paid a Birmingham man $1,995 for the car eight months before Dr. King's death.

Authorities determined later that Eric Starvo Galt was James Earl Ray, who now is serving a 99-year sentence after pleading guilty to killing the civil rights leader.

Smith distributed 2,000 color brochures on the automobile to antique and classical car dealers across the country. Smith said a 1966 Mustang with red interior "in mint condition" normally would bring $10,000 to $12,000, but doesn't know what the historical significance of the white car with a dented rear fender, a crinkled front bumper and 39,600 miles will do to the price.

Profits from the auction will be split between Renfro Hays, a private investigator who said he was never paid for work done for one of Ray's lawyers, and an unnamed person who bought Ray's 40 percent share.

The automobile, recovered in Atlanta the day after Dr. King's slaying, was kept in a shed at the Shelby County Correction Center until last May. Except for draining the oil, changing the gas lines and gas filter and filling the back tires with air, no other work was needed to get the most famous Mustang in Memphis history running again, Smith said.

Smith said he will start the auction at noon. Nothing else will be sold.

"It may last 20 minutes, it may last 25 minutes, it may last 15 minutes," Smith said. "It may be the shortest auction in history. . . . But when the hammer falls, it's going to have a new owner."

The Mustang drew little attention yesterday until TV crews arrived.

Charles King of Jackson, Miss., stopped to take some pictures of the Mustang.

"It's a real attention-getter," King said as he snapped a picture. "I'm sure someone selling it will make good money off of it because it relates to a tragedy that will never be forgotten."

Asked what he thought of someone making money from such a tragedy, King replied: "I think that's just part of business."